

stabilize the North Korean state and provide a possible venue for bringing it out of isolation. The greatest contribution of this book is its comprehensiveness, that is to say, it shows the uniqueness of North Korea among the many socialist transitions. In the end, we may have to conclude that the lessons from transitions in Central and Eastern Europe have limited applicability to North Korea because the unique historical situation in Europe in the early 1990s is unlikely to repeat itself in East Asia. *Driving Forces of Socialist Transformation* shows what can happen when North Korea transitions from socialism to a market-driven economy, as well as the unlikelihood of such a transition.— *Martyn de Bruyn, Ph.D.*

The Cleanest Race: How North Koreans See Themselves—and Why It Matters

B.R. Myers, Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2010. 200 pp. ISBN: 978-1-933633-91-6.

B.R. Myers's *The Cleanest Race* is an unreliable work. Beginning with the preface, one finds misrepresentation. Singling out *North Korean Review*, Myers makes the incredible claim that those associated with the journal "do not understand Korean well enough to read [North Korean] official texts" (12). What is the basis of this allegation when the NKR founder is originally from South Korea and a significant number of the journal editors and those who have published in it are native speakers of Korean? Reading requires discernment, but Myers makes rather odd translation choices, for example, "Homeland Liberation War" for *choguk haebang chŏnjaeng* and "jackals" for *sŭngnyangi* (39, 40). *Choguk* literally means "ancestor country," which has a male bias. North Korean texts use "fatherland." *Moguk* or *ŏmŏni choguk* is motherland. As for *sŭngnyangi*, it is a dhole, a species of wild dog found in Korea, unlike the jackal, *chaek'ol* or *chyak'al* in Korean. North Korean sources render *sŭngnyangi* in English as "wolf."

The real problem, however, is Myers's alleged discovery that North Korean ideology is rooted in Japanese fascism. Replacing the official *Juche* ideology with his own idea of "paranoid, race-based nationalism," he says, "[North Korea has] an implacably xenophobic, race-based worldview derived largely from fascist Japanese myth," and, "They [the Hirohito cult and Kim Il Sung cult] are *fundamentally* alike, because they derive from a fundamentally similar view of the world" (109; emphasis in original). One does not have to be a professional historian or professional logician to see that there is something wrong here. Basically, what Myers perceives as fascist — a term he uses regularly though simultaneously claims is "too vague to be much use" — are the conceptions of racial purity, blood-based nationalism, and unity of nation and territory. None of this, however, is exclusive to fascism, as European thought in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries shows. But comparison to Japan must be addressed.

Japanese fascism was ultranationalist and racist, but its xenophobia differs from that of North Korea. Japan presided aggressively over a multiethnic East Asian empire, and the State Shinto doctrine of *Kokutai*, which Myers never explores, ordained Japanese imperialism as a divine cosmopolitan mission to assimilate and subliminate world culture into Japanese culture. Moreover, *Kokutai* made Hirohito a direct descendant of the Shinto gods. North Korean ideology and the Kim Il Sung personality cult bear no likeness to this whatsoever. Unlike Japanese fascist ideology, North Korean ideology is built upon exaggerated secular heroic legend, not myth. Myth involves dragons, fairies, ghosts, goblins, gods, spirits, sprites, incantations, spells, and so forth. Myth is the world of supernatural beings and phenomena. This is not generically applicable to the North Korean state legends that Myers lists as "Mother Korea and her children," the "parent leader" (Kim Il Sung), the "dear leader" (Kim Jong Il), "foreigners," and the "Yankee colony" (South Korea).

Confusion with language, comparative ideology, and myth and legend are not the only problems in this book. There is also a real failure to understand Korean cultural and political history. Myers, for instance, casts as "bizarre and comical" anecdotes about Kim Il Sung acquiring his "best ideas" in his sleep (36). In traditional Korean culture, particularly in peasant culture and shamanism, dream states bear wisdom. North Korea began as a mostly poor peasant country with a peasant-majority Workers' Party of Korea. Although the Soviet

Army-initiated North Korean system did not place political faith in the peasantry, this was a decisive social group — exploited, illiterate, and landless — that the party incorporated into state power based on the united front policy. Myers says in passing, “Little [Japanese] propaganda reached the illiterate majority of the [Korean] population, who often had to be brutally coerced into complying with Japanese demands” (28). Yet he never considers how mass poor-peasant psychology affected ideology.

Myers also neglects Korean Neo-Confucianism, asserting that the North Korean *Juche* axiom “Man is the master of all things,” in his translation, is humanist (46). The axiom is an ancient anthropocentric principle derived from Chinese Confucianism. Myers, however, is convinced that Confucian thought — which had a more than 500-year history in Chosŏn Korea from 1392 to 1910 — has no carryovers in North Korean ideology. One should note that the supernatural *Kokutai* doctrine rejects the idea of humans as masters. As for Soviet Stalinist influence after the Soviet Army liberation in 1945, it is a non-presence for Myers. This is so even despite his citing sections of the unpublished manuscript of Tatiana Gabroussenko’s *Soldiers on the Cultural Front*, a literary history that proves with empirical evidence that North Korean literary policy and literature are greatly indebted to Soviet Stalinism and Soviet socialist realism. Gabroussenko’s findings are never mentioned, for they complicate Myers’s fixation with the fascist claim.

But Myers not only avoids inconvenient facts. He engages in psychoanalysis when he has no publication record in the field. “I am not qualified to analyze the cult (or anything else) from a psychological standpoint,” he says (110). Nevertheless, he goes on to assemble pastiches of ideas from different psychoanalytic schools — universal archetypes (Jung), hermaphroditism and denial of death (Becker), mother fixation (Fromm), and phallic mother (Freud) — arbitrarily imposing them on North Korea.

In his preface, Myers says, “By far the most common mistake [...] has been the projection of Western or South Korean values and common sense onto the North Koreans” (73, 75, 80–81, 109, 110). But projection and dismissal are precisely what Myers is doing in *The Cleanest Race*. He brushes off all established associations of Communism, Confucianism, and Stalinism with North Korea as “various fallacies,” never arguing his case, just making assertions to be accepted on faith. This is dogmatics, not academics. Altogether, everything about North Korean ideology in this book is about fascist derivation or fascist correspondences. This is a book full of eclecticism, error, and contradiction. Revealingly, the fundamental claims Myers makes were first presented in opinion columns and reviews for *The Atlantic* (2004 and 2008), *The New York Times* (2003 and 2006), and *The Wall Street Journal* (2006 and 2008). *The Cleanest Race* is not about how North Koreans see themselves. The book is an extended opinion column. — Alzo David-West, Aichi Prefectural University